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SUBJECT: TRIAL BEGINS FOR PRESIDENT'S ATTACKERS

¶1. (U) The trial for the 28 individuals accused of attacking President Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao in February 2008 began in Dili on July 13. The suspects, including ex-soldiers and an Australian woman, are charged with attempted murder, conspiracy to murder, and other offenses, for their alleged role in the attacks on Timor's two highest-ranking public officials. Ramos-Horta was shot multiple times outside his home and nearly died in the attacks on February 11, 2008, while Gusmao escaped a separate ambush on the same day unharmed.

¶2. (U) The leader of the group, Gustao Salsinha, denied the accusations in court. Salsinha surrendered to authorities in April 2008 after remaining at large for several months. The group's original leader, Alfredo Reinado, was killed by the president's security detail at the time of the attack. Ramos-Horta publicly forgave his attackers and suggested he might pardon the ex-soldiers if they are convicted.

¶3. (U) UN police conducted lengthy security checks at the court building and closed the streets around the building for several hours. The capacity crowd inside the court room consisted mainly of relatives and other ex-soldiers, the so-called petitioners whose mass firing sparked political crisis in 2006. Spectators on the streets cheered when Salsinha arrived and waved banners calling for truth and justice. Police kept the crowd away from the front of the building and removed the banners without incident. Lawyers expect the trial to last for several months.

¶4. (SBU) In a July 13 conversation with the Ambassador, Timor-Leste's Prosecutor General also predicted that the trial would last several months, if for no other reason than more than 60 witnesses are scheduled to testify in addition to the accused. The Prosecutor General expressed some reservations regarding the strength of the state's case, while noting it had been prepared prior to her assuming the post in March 2009. She shared, for example, that the ballistics evidence against the accused was inconclusive.

¶5. (U) Embassy requests Department approval of the if-asked press guidance suggested below.

Q: What is the position of the United States on the trial of Gustao Salsinha and others for the attack on President Ramos-Horta?

A: We applaud the steps the Timorese Government has taken to date to peacefully apprehend, investigate and prosecute those individuals suspected of the attacks on the President and Prime Minister. We have consistently urged the Government to bring accused criminals to justice under domestic law. The full establishment and development of rule of law and the elimination of an atmosphere of impunity are critically important for sustaining stability in Timor-Leste.

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